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Motivations, expectations and experiences of Australian rural and regional planners

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JEL Classifications:

Keywords: Rural and regional planners; expectations; experiences; Australia

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Introduction

Planning, which involves making decisions about the design, development, infrastructure and services in the built and natural environment, is a future-oriented and inter-disciplinary profession that requires a diverse range of knowledge and skills from disciplines such as geography, science, sociology, law, architecture and planning (Dredge and Coiacetto, 2006; Planning Institute of Australia [PIA], 2011; Savery and de Chastel, 2009). Planners frequently specialise in a particular interest area, such as development assessment, urban design, community development, heritage conservation and management of natural resources, and can work for government or in private practice (PIA, 2011). Yet, whilst planners play an extremely important role in shaping communities, planning has a relatively low profile with most people unaware of what planners actually do – as Dredge and Coiacetto (2006) argue, the unfortunate reality is that "the role and expertise of planners remains largely invisible and poorly understood" (p29, 2006).

Whilst the wider community often fails to appreciate the impact of the planning profession, research suggests that planning appeals to students who want to make 'the world a better place' (Baum, 1997, p. 179). For example, after interviewing and surveying American planning students, Baum (1997) identified three key groups of people attracted to planning: social scientists (like theory, analysis, and research), social workers (want to interact with people, strategise and negotiate) and surgeons (want to improve the conditions of people and places). Similarly, in focus groups (n=18) and a survey (n=149) of first year Australian planning students enrolled in three Queensland universities, Dredge and Coiacetto (2006) explored students conceptions of planning and motivations for studying. They found that these newly enrolled students, many of whom had found planning by accident, had very positive but vague views about what planning was. A third (34%) were attracted by the content and diversity of the discipline, with approximately a fifth (21%) attracted by the way planning was done (creative, outdoors, teamwork) and idealistic-altruistic motives (15%) in terms of making a difference to the environment, future generations and giving people a better quality of life.

Surprisingly, although there is a small body of literature exploring student's motivations (Dredge and Coiacetto, 2006), experience of mandatory work experience programs for students (Freestone, et al., 2006; Freestone, et al., 2007) and educational priorities and experiences (Budge, 2009; Coiacetto, 2004; Gunder, 2002; Hamnett, 1999; Heywood,2006; Meng, 2009; White & Mayo, 2005), very little is known about planners *actual* work experiences. That is, do their day-to-day work activities match these initial expectations? Aside from a few professional association surveys (e.g., PIA, 2004, 2009), to our

knowledge, published empirical research on the practical experience of 'being a planner' is virtually non-existent. A notable exception is research by Hurlimann (2009), who surveyed 50 PIA members about whether there were gaps in their planning education in the area of environmental education. Planners felt current planning education did not sufficiently address environmental issues (specifically sustainable building design, planning for biodiversity and managing climate change) and that education needed to further facilitate critical thinking and independent inquiry skills. Indeed, whilst accredited planning programs in Australia endeavour to cover contemporary and an increasingly diverse range of subjects and issues, there is ongoing debate about precisely what should be taught and the core skills planners require (Budge, 2009; Hamnett, 1999). Questions about the relative emphasis on technical planning skills (e.g., statutory knowledge, strategic planning and urban design skills, computerised modelling) and 'softer' non-technical generic skills (e.g., conflict resolution, project management, leadership), as well as how to adequately cover specific emerging areas such as social planning, economic planning, transport planning and issues of climate change remain unanswered and are dealt with differently by each tertiary provider (Budge, 2009; Hurlimann, 2009). Critically, Baum (1997) argues that deciding what to include in education should start by "asking one question: What do students need to do as planning practitioners?" (p184).

The answer to that question, however, as well as differing by each individual planner's specific career choices (i.e., social and community planning versus transport planning) might also differ according to locality. Whereas urban-based planners are typically specialists who will work in teams on urban issues, regional and rural planners typically work in more isolated circumstances on a wider range of planning tasks which also encompass regional economic development, natural resource planning and environmental management. These differences mean regional and rural planners may need a different and more diverse skill-set than their urban counterparts, with the PIA (2004) explaining that they "are often involved with large scale planning issues, undertaking non-traditional planning tasks and going beyond town boundaries" (p24). Unfortunately, due to issues such as limited infrastructure, services and professional support, it is difficult to recruit staff and there is a long-term shortage of planners in rural and regional Australia (PIA, 2004).

Thus, this research – an online survey of 185 rural and regional planning practitioners - has three main aims. First, with the wider community and even planning students often unable to clearly articulate planners' activities and achievements, our survey provides insight into Australian planners daily work experiences. Second, given the demand for planners in rural and regional areas, we investigate planners' motivations and experiences of living and working in a non-urban setting. Third, in light of the

increasing diversity and complexity of the planning role, we investigate the extent to which their planning education prepared them for the role and the specific technical and non-technical skills required. As well as expanding knowledge about the day-to-day experiences of regional and rural planners, the findings will help inform policy and practice by identifying major planning challenges, constraints and accomplishments, as well as any educational gaps or future priorities.

Methodology

Procedure & Participants

After obtaining ethics clearance, ten Australian professional planning associations were approached in late 2010 (by email and phone) to assist in the circulation of the online survey to their members; only the Planning Institute of Australia agreed and included the project description and survey link in a newsletter bulletin to its 4,724 members. The online survey was designed and implemented using KeySurvey, with only one response able to be registered from a unique internet provider address. There was a prize draw incentive (10 x $25 gift vouchers) to encourage survey completion, with the online survey 'open' for a 6 week period.

A total of 185 rural and regional planning practitioners (56% males; 44% females) from across Australia completed the survey. The average age was 43 years (ranging from 22 to 70 years), with two-thirds married with children (48% have 2 children). The vast majority had a degree (82%), and over half also had postgraduate qualifications (59%). Only 7% earned less than $50,000, with a third (34%) earning between $50-$75,000 and nearly half (48%) over $75,000 (20% chose not to disclose their income). There was a wide range of experience in planning; over half (51%) had over ten years planning experience and a quarter had either less than five years (23%) or five to ten years experience (26%). The majority worked for local government (57%) and their main planning specialties and expertise included development assessment (75%), strategic planning (70%), regional planning (57%), environmental planning (42%), heritage and conservation (33%) and urban design (24%). Almost half (46%) have been working in their current organisation for more than 5 years. Participants were committed to their profession, with 37% planning to work as a regional planner until retirement and 35% for the next five years – only 8% said they would only be a regional planner for the next year or two.

Measures

The online survey, titled '*Challenges and Experiences of Regional Planners in Australia', was* developed by the authors and most items were measured on five-point Likert scales, anchored at strongly agree and strongly disagree. After initial survey development, a pilot was sent to a panel of experts (both practising planners and academics teaching planning) to ensure content and face validity, with their suggestions on content, wording, clarity, and length integrated into the final iteration. This article focuses specifically on the results surrounding planners' motivations, expectations and experiences (a copy of the complete survey is available from the authors). Section 1 explored *motivations and experiences of regional planning*: why they chose to become a regional planner (six work-related and six location-related questions; see Table 1), two questions assessing the extent to which they like and are confident in the role of regional planner and three open-ended questions assessing the main benefits and limitations of being a planner in a regional community. Section 2 explored their *evaluations of their planning education*; one question assessed whether their education prepared them well for the role, with 12 questions (see Table 2) assessing the specific technical and non-technical abilities they thought were needed to be a regional planner (important – yes/no) and whether they had adequate training for each within their course (missing from course – yes/no). Two open-ended questions asked if and how their education could have better prepared them for their role as a regional planner/decision-maker, and for them to describe their greatest achievement in the last three years.

Results

Motivations and experiences of regional planning

Table 1 illustrates the job and location reasons for choosing to be a planner/decision-maker in a regional community. The top three job-related reasons were: the nature of planning work (60%), to gain planning experience (35%), and better working environment (34%). The top three location-related reasons were: to enjoy the country/regional lifestyle (69%), flexibility to balance family and work (35%), and to raise children/family in the country (28%). The majority enjoyed (92%) and felt confident (89%) in their role as a regional planner/decision-maker; in their responses to the open-ended question about the main benefit of being a planner in a regional community, planners emphasised how they gained much broader experience across a diverse range of fields in planning and enjoy a closer relationship with the community, with planners explaining how they valued the "*opportunity to engage with community - grass roots planning*" and "*to see and feel that you are making a difference with the work*

that you do". Planners strongly believed their non-urban location gave them more planning opportunities in terms of quicker progression to senior roles, wide diversity of planning tasks and the ability to engage directly with the community and to see the consequences of their decisions.

> Excellent exposure to all forms of planning, from everyday domestic applications to industrial, to land division, and policy planning. There is higher opportunity to take direct responsibility for a wide range of policy issues and interact with the community
>
> To be a "jack of all trades" in planning - not just a cog in the wheel, but to be the whole wheel
>
> Get to be part of the community and make a difference - know your clients as people not files. How idealistic is that after 20 years!

As well as enjoying the varied work, planners' comments emphasised the social benefits of a rural lifestyle for them and their families. Compared to the city, they felt people were friendlier, housing was more affordable and there was a relaxed approach to life. The following comments were typical: "*Lifestyle - I still have the job opportunities yet still don't have to sit in traffic every morning and night*" and "*Opportunity to live a rural/country lifestyle and to own a largish block of land free of nearby neighbours with the benefit of home grown vegetables, fruits, nuts*".

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Yet, whilst they valued the work and lifestyle opportunities in rural and regional Australia, in response to an open-ended question, planners described the limitations and challenges they experience compared to an urban planning role. These challenges centred on reduced access to training, resources and isolation from peers, with an acknowledgment that career development and progression/promotion might require shifting away from their regional community. Several planners described how they were the only planner at their council, which meant there were challenges in terms of feeling isolated from other planners, recognition within the profession and even scheduling annual level in large amounts due to the heavy workload on return. This isolation meant planners needed to be multi-skilled and knowledgeable in range of economic and social issues – essentially, "*needed to become a quasi expert in many related but still separate fields*". They describe how isolating it was to be so far from capital cities in order to attend professional development conferences and courses, with comments such as the following typical: *"Lack of networking opportunities. Lack of peers to discuss planning's 'hard decisions'"* and *"distance from other planners, so lack of other professionals to bounce ideas off and seek advice from".* As well as feeling isolated from peers, mentors and funding schemes, many

planners described how they felt isolated from national and state bureaucrats who had *"no comprehension of country areas and what country people require".*

> Unfortunately, the main limitation and challenge is planning itself - legislation and plans designed to regulate highly urbanised areas, which just doesn't work in regional areas.
>
> City centred policies - expectations that urban issues/policies will transpose to a regional context.
>
> Competing interests, available funding, less attention given to regional issues as opposed to urban based issues. Regional communities often suffer in silence and have generally needed to be self sufficient in many ways.

Several planners also highlighted the unpleasant consequences of living in a small community and making controversial decisions when everyone knows you: "*having personal relationships with those affected, directly or indirectly, by planning issues, especially when controversial. At times difficult decisions can result in social difficulties*" and "'*closeness' of community with many decisions, large and small, in the spotlight. In the city you can be anonymous - for the most part, people affected by your decisions never know you".*

Evaluation of planning education

There were very mixed views on the extent to which planners felt their education had prepared them for their role; approximately half felt well-prepared (48%), with the remainder neutral (29%) or negative (25%). Table 2 illustrates planners' evaluations of a list of key skills and knowledge for being a regional planner and whether they had adequate training for each within their course. The key required technical skills were basic planning skills, statutory knowledge and strategic planning skills, with planners believing that their course need to focus more on computerised modelling tools and basic planning skills. The key required non-technical skills centered on communication, analytical ability and conflict resolution; over half felt that conflict resolution, project management and team leadership skills were missing from their course.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

When planners reflected on how to improve their education, their feedback centred on providing a more practical course that prepares them for 'the real world', including greater information on rural and regional planning, and encouraging work experience placements. Planners emphasised the need for more practical based planning, which one termed "*planning 101*", to prepare student planners for the real world. They felt their course typically focussed too much on theory and wanted more practical examples (both strategic and development aspects) to aid day to day decision making, suggesting that role plays, examples and assignments based around real world planning would make the transition to work much smoother for new graduates. They desired increased exposure to development assessment processes and pitfalls, as well as current development trends, assessment parameters and limitations of planning schemes – "*how to read legislation, write policy and assess applications".*

> Yes. The complexities of many layers of legislation and planning instruments, coupled with the need to make value judgements on competing issues made early years in the profession very stressful. These challenges should be better covered in tertiary education.
>
> I think it would have been good to learn a bit about the actual role of planners in the work environment, rather than the theoretical role of planning
>
> I feel that the knowledge I have gained from my studies is more focused on the theory. There needs to be some level of education on the practical side of things. For example, what if the client you are dealing with doesn't like what you are advising them? How do you tell someone that their plans simply do not fit within the intentions of the local planning scheme and to perhaps try another approach?

Planners recommended more emphasis on non-planning (but related) disciplines such as building, health, engineering and project management, as well as developing project management, community consultation, negotiation and mediation skills. There was also significant discussion about how they were not well prepared for working in the political environment that is government and would have liked a greater understanding of political influences and pressures. Planners felt that the ability to liaise and converse with community representatives, interest groups and opposing interests is a valuable skill that was not in their course and would help improve the quality of decision makers. Of course, there was also a clear acknowledgment that *"an education really teaches you how to learn... cannot beat on-the-job training".*

Most planners felt that there was a very limited focus on regional planning in their course, explaining that their city-based courses focussed on urban issues to the determent of rural issues, particularly transportation, economic growth/expansion and environmental issues. They explained that the

management of planning decisions relating to rural and environmental lands can be extremely complex, suggesting that courses need to provide a better understanding of agricultural issues and rural dynamics (e.g., farming practices, regional economies), utilise regional case studies and cover planning options for non-growth areas (i.e., how do planners help communities in areas of limited economic growth).

> Planning has generally focussed on the urban aspects of land use with "rural" the areas left over. That places the planner on the back foot from day one. Also the planner needs to have a strong political presence to counter local political and social forces that work on short term objectives to the determent of longer term strategic objectives. The role is as much about political presence as knowledge.
>
> Yes, my education could have prepared me better. The problem is planning degrees aim to educate people for entry level planning work - usually development assessment in an urban setting, really no regional planning in it. Policy focus was also on issues relevant to major metropolitan centres, for example urban consolidation debate, TODs. Issues I work on now such as relationship between urban growth and rural land-use, the economic and social development of a region etc were not discussed in any depth. Urban design projects and case studies were all capital city focus, with no attention to understanding landscape and ecological processes whatsoever. Planning degrees should ensure they have electives, or at least assignment topic choices, that offer students opportunity to learn about regional planning issues and approaches.

Finally, there was a strong recommendation for courses to include compulsory work experience placements – ideally in both urban and rural/regional localities, so that students could decide which environment better suits them. Planners felt their course did not really prepare them for their day to day role (in that they knew the theory, not the practice) and believed that work experience would have been extremely beneficial.

How planning shapes regional and rural Australian communities

Finally, when asked to describe, in their own words, their greatest planning achievement in the last three years, planners provided a diverse range of examples illustrating how their decisions influenced local communities. Many described their sense of satisfaction for delivering and completing development assessments (DA's) in a timely and accurate matter, and providing balanced considerations to issues such as bushfire, environmental, planning and amenity concerns. Planners described how a priority for them was to engage and educate key stakeholders, and the wider community, about the planning and DA process. They emphasised the importance of being able to negotiate with a multitude of stakeholders to achieve balanced and fair outcomes, and how seeing comprehension and understanding from stakeholders was an extremely rewarding part of their job.

> Mainly being able to help Mum and Dad applicants being able to lodge an application for a material change of use - and understand the process involved and why there is a process involved. Getting a better outcome for the community as a whole not just a good outcome for the developer - getting the developer to understand why Council enforce the policies they do.
>
> Communications skills are absolutely essential. Development assessment planners for regulatory authorities have the difficult task of explaining, describing and interpreting what are often very complicated, wordy and legalistic regulations and planning controls to the lay person who may have little or no understanding of them. It is almost the role of an interpreter - translating one language into another. And it just keeps getting more complex. My greatest achievement would have to be fine tuning this skill by interpreting and practicing the regulations and working on interpreting these to the applicant/layperson.
>
> 'Greatest' achievements are my daily 'wins' in dissuading applicants with unrealistic visions to amend their development applications to suit a more realistic integration with planning controls and environmental standards.

Planners explained how their priority was to balance the need for growth with the needs of the community, which typically involved negotiation, mediation, resolution of issues and the development of strategic plans. Many took pride in their role in the preparation and acceptance of (often inaugural) regional land use, development and planning schemes/strategies, with several describing how they had stopped dwelling development in prime agricultural land and changed the attitude to this long standing practice. A smaller number of planners also identified involving other professionals in the planning process, becoming more aware of the significance of politics, legislation and governance, and helping elected officials understand what they can and cannot control as significant career achievements. The following quotes further highlight the diversity and scale of these planners' decisions.

> Accommodation facilities for 1200 coal mine workers with offsets to the local regional community, such as sporting fields, wastewater treatment upgrades and additional road infrastructure
>
> 25 year strategy for the poultry industry in northern Victoria, approval for a major tourist facility, approvals for works associated with a major rural freeway
>
> Being part of a team that was responsible for the successful placement of two rural estate properties onto the World Heritage Area listings
>
> Negotiating with a multi-national company to achieve a major retail development in the town centre that complimented the existing town infrastructure and character and preferred community aspirations
>
> Organised a successful appeal against a series of planning decisions that contravened the relevant planning scheme and the Victorian Coastal Strategy, failing to consider sea level rise under a likely climate change scenario

Discussion

As the first study to quantifiably explore rural and regional Australian planners' perceptions of their role and challenges, these findings provide an invaluable benchmark of current experiences and priorities. First, it is clear that rural and regional planners very much enjoy their job. They value living in a rural community and having the opportunity to help shape its future. They typically find the work diverse and interesting, explaining the excitement involved with shaping the built form and development footprint of regional areas whilst maintaining character, rural values and engaging the community. From a recruitment perspective, the key reasons they chose to be a regional planner were the varied nature of the planning work, enjoying the rural lifestyle and the work/life balance that meant more time with their families.

Second, rural and regional planners often felt isolated from urban based peers and decision-makers, who they believe do not truly comprehend the unique characteristics that affect rural and regional planning. Planners reported typically practicing in isolation, with limited opportunities for supervision, mentoring and support from colleagues; in particular, they missed informal brainstorming about planning issues with colleagues. They also felt that planning was typically too urban-centric, with much less attention given to regional issues. Whilst they enjoyed the rural locality and their job, planners described how it was sometimes difficult to make controversial planning decisions when they lived in a small community and everybody knew them. These findings highlight how geographic isolation can contribute to professional isolation, as the logistics (e.g., travel time, cost, shortage of staff to cover absences) made it difficult for planners to access educational and professional development activities which were usually in the city. As the PIA (2004) has previously recommended, our findings show it is important that professional development courses are accessible (on-line or held in locally accessible regional areas) to planners in rural and regional areas. Potentially more important, however, is support with day-to-day decision-making – as many reported being the only planner in their region, the establishment of virtual video-conferencing brainstorming sessions with peers (planners from neighbouring rural regions) and local mentoring schemes would be practical ways to help reduce feelings of isolation and enhance the sharing of knowledge, ideas and innovative problem-solving and decision-making.

Third, rural and regional planners had explicit recommendations in terms of training and education. Although half felt their education had well-prepared them, half had reservations and suggested more training with basic planning, computerised modelling tools and conflict resolution, project management

and team leadership skills. Planners felt their courses were too theoretical and wanted more practical training, specifically more real life examples of what happens in the day-to-day life of a planner and how to do things, such as read legislation, write policy, prepare and assess applications. They also advocated for compulsory work experience placements, in both urban and regional settings, where student planners could better learn what is expected of them in the role. Notably, many of the key skills identified were the non-technical 'softer' skills that centered on enhancing communication and relationship building skills. Whilst Hurlimann (2009) noted that planners wanted a greater sustainability component in their training, our research illustrates how there also appears to be a need for a more practical, skills-development orientation in university courses. These findings suggests that the planning curriculum should include a greater focus on practical real world planning examples, as planners desire less theory and more experience with the administrative components that will comprise their day-to-day activities. Of course, maintaining the correct balance between theory and practice is an ongoing challenge and delicate balancing act, as educational providers need to equip planning students with specific planning skills, develop generic critical thought and writing skills, as well as "the capacity to work with change, to confront it and to shape it to achieve better futures" (p2, Budge, 2009). With research to date typically focussing on the reflections and learnings of students (Dredge and Coiacetto, 2006; Freestone, et al., 2006; Freestone, et al., 2007) or planning academics (e.g., Budge, 2009; Coiacetto, 2004; Gunder, 2002), our findings provide some unique practical insight into the educational needs, expectations and experiences of Australian rural and regional planners.

As mentioned in the introduction, this paper attempted to capture an 'overall' view of planners' perceptions of their roles and challenges, current experiences, key planning challenges, perceived educational gaps and future priorities. As the first survey to explicitly explore such issues, we encourage future work to expand on our initial research and more fully explore issues, including the extent to which our list of technical and non-technical abilities fully captures the range of abilities required planning. For example, a potential limitation of our survey is not listing professional ethics and ethical-decision making as a separate required skill, with planners comments - in terms of both professional identity and professional practice - showing an underlying concern about distinctive ethical issues that arise in that practice context. In addition, whether there are any correlations between, for example, how long ago a planner did their degree and their satisfaction rates with such qualifications, whether postgraduate work enhanced the quality of planning, if young and recently educated planners more satisfied or vice versa, and other pertinent questions which are beyond the scope of this paper. The issues mentioned above are undoubtedly questions that need to be addressed in future research.

In summary, our research has highlighted the experience of planning as a career, identifying how planners shape rural communities and some of their key achievements. By documenting planning practitioner's evaluations and reflections on their education, and any gaps, our study identifies specific areas for potential improvement. Moreover, given that the wider community – and even planning students (Dredge and Coiacetto, 2006) – often struggle to comprehend precisely what planners do, our findings may help raise the profile of planning and inform those who are considering rural planning as a career choice. Whilst future research should explain the extent to which these experiences and issues differ or are the same for urban planners, this research illustrates how the vast majority of rural and regional planners very much enjoyed and felt confident in their role.

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Table 1: Relative importance of job and location reasons for choosing regional/rural planner role

Job-Related Reasons		*Location-Related Reasons*	
Nature of planning work	60%	Enjoy the country/regional lifestyle	69%
To gain planning experience	35%	Flexibility to balance family and work	35%
Better working environment	34%	Raise children/family in the country	28%
Better job opportunities in planning	29%	Affordable living	25%
Community involvement	25%	Family in the area	22%
Opportunity to earn a good income	18%	Partner works in the area	15%

Table 2: Skills and knowledge important for planning and whether missing from their course[#]

	Important	Missing from Course
Technical Skills		
Basic planning skills – reading plans/levels etc.	**97.8%**	**37.8%**
Statutory knowledge and legislation	**97.8%**	24.9%
Strategic planning skills	**95.1%**	31.4%
Knowledge of history and purpose of regional planning	80.5%	33.0%
Landscape and urban design skills	76.2%	**36.2%**
Skills in computerised modelling tools	47.6%	**56.8%**
Non-Technical Skills		
Communication skills (verbal and graphic presentation)	**98.4%**	30.8%
Analytical skills	**97.8%**	29.7%
Conflict resolution, mediation and negotiation skills	**95.7%**	**58.4%**
Organizational skills, prioritising, time management	93.5%	51.4%
Project management skills	92.4%	**55.1%**
Team leadership skills	77.3%	**60.5%**

[#]*The three most important skills and those missing from course are in bold*